



A Collaborative Approach to Increasing Diversity in the Environmental and Planning Industry

BY GARY JAKOBS, AICP, CEO OF ASCENT, AND ZACHARY MILLER, AICP, ASCENT SENIOR TRANSPORTATION AND ENVIRONMENTAL PLANNER, WITH CONTRIBUTIONS BY THE FOLLOWING CEOS: LESLIE MOULTON-POST, ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCE ASSOCIATES ASSOCIATES; JOE MONACO, DUDEK; KEITH MCCANN, PLACEWORKS; AND JOHN DREHER, RINCON CONSULTANTS.



Although the environmental and planning industry often prides itself on planning for diverse populations and for applying the principles of equity and inclusion in their work, the field itself suffers from a lack of diversity in the ranks of its planning professionals. This article discusses a unique approach taken by five firms to make a difference: creation of a collaborative diversity-oriented internship program.

Collaboration Arises Out of Adversity and Tragedy

In March 2020, the world paused as COVID-19, the most consequential public health threat in our lifetimes, forced offices to close and employees to work from home. Tremendous uncertainty roiled our lives and economy. It was during these first weeks of the pandemic that Gary Jakobs, the CEO of the planning and environmental firm Ascent, reached out to the CEOs of four other privately run planning and environmental consultancies: Dudek, Environmental Science Associates (ESA), PlaceWorks, and Rincon Consultants. The intent of the outreach was to connect with similar firms—all had significant California statewide presence—to share what we learned and the experiences we had while responding to the early challenges associated with the pandemic.

This outreach resulted with the formation of what we now call the CEO Exchange—regular meetings involving the CEOs of these five firms. Initially, these monthly discussions focused on how to address the many uncertainties created by the pandemic, such as those related to employees working from home, inconsistent workload, and programs aimed at keeping employees on board.



“The internship program has been a great opportunity for me to learn and grow in real-world planning and designing projects. My actual internship experience has surpassed my expectations. I have been able to apply design and planning principles to various projects. I worked on various teams and gained vital experience working with different groups. For example, my work on the 102-acre Sacramento project has allowed me to implement and see the various things I learned in action. More importantly, my internship experience has helped me identify my strengths and things I need to improve, giving me more confidence to pursue a lasting urban designing career.”

Abenaezer Tassew
(Master of Urban Planning
Candidate, San Jose
State University)

Not long after the exchange was formed, the world was shaken again. On May 25, 2020, George Floyd was murdered in Minneapolis—another grim reminder of the racial injustice that persists in our nation. This tragedy, captured on video and seen by millions, became an inspiration for both reflection and action. Numerous businesses in the United States responded by examining how they addressed diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in their workspaces. Within our own group, we found that each of our five firms was at a different point in implementing DEI programs and increasing staff diversity. The CEO Exchange was used as a forum to discuss and share details of our respective programs and to identify areas we could consider for improvement.

As leaders of firms that collectively employ thousands of environmental and planning professionals throughout the state, we also recognized that, together, we had a strong voice in our industry. In June 2020, we sent a letter to the leadership of the California Association of Environmental Professionals (AEP) and the California Chapter of the American Planning Association (APA), calling for action in two specific areas: (1) promoting legislation to add environmental justice to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), a difficult and ongoing process, and (2) supporting major initiatives aimed at adding persons from disadvantaged communities, specifically Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), to our profession through various outreach programs enumerated in the letter. Both APA and AEP had developed or were developing their own diversity programs, and we felt it important to lend our voice.

A Joint Internship Is Formed

THE CONCEPT

Although we frequently discussed the importance of increasing diversity in the environmental and planning industries during our exchanges, we felt we needed to do much more. This need grew into the idea of a joint internship, a program to create opportunities for students from underrepresented communities to engage with professionals in the private and public sectors and gain valuable industry work experience. Although it took a few months to reach consensus around how the program should be formed (each of the five firms already had an established internship program of its own), we developed a framework to move forward with the planning and implementation of a collaborative internship program.

The preliminary concept was to include two components: an intensive collaborative effort during which all the interns would work together on one project, followed by a more traditional internship period during which the interns would spend the balance of the summer working for one of the five participating firms.



“Being a part of the DEI Multifirm Charrette was an extremely valuable opportunity for me. This program gave me the chance to join the consulting world and gain valuable experience. I am proud to have been a part of the diverse team of young planners.”

Ethan Wynacht
(Bachelor of Science in Environmental Policy Analysis and Planning, University of California Davis)



Each participating firm agreed to hire two BIPOC college students as interns, beginning in June 2022. To provide the interns with a meaningful experience during the project phase of the internship, we engaged in discussions with the City of Sacramento (each firm maintains an office in Sacramento), to identify a project that the interns could work on together. The City was pleased to be a partner, and the timing was perfect: The City had recently purchased a 100-acre site in a historically disadvantaged and underrepresented area for the purpose of developing a project to benefit the community, as well as meet critical affordable housing and youth community gathering and sports program needs. The participating firms and the City agreed that this project would provide an ideal platform for the first component of the internship program: a two-week charrette.

After months of planning and coordination with the City, the group of interns assembled for the charrette, spending one week each at the offices of two of the participating firms. Over the duration of the charrette, the interns toured the project site; met with elected officials, City staff, and key stakeholders and community members; and received training and guidance from participating firm representatives. Empowered and inspired by this input and guidance, the interns worked together to develop a conceptual site plan, as well as an environmental constraints analysis. The charrette culminated in a presentation to Sacramento Mayor Darrell Steinberg, City staff, and members of the five collaborating firms.

The professionalism, knowledge, and polish displayed by the interns during the presentation so impressed the mayor that he requested that the students present their work at a public meeting of the City’s Planning and Design Commission. The presentation to the commission was lauded, earning the interns praise for their insight, vision, and ability to complete a vast amount of high-quality work in a short time frame. In addition, the interns offered a perspective rarely seen; their work was informed by experience living in communities experiencing some of the same planning and environmental issues addressed in the presentation.

Following the charrette, the interns began the second component of the internship program: working as employees at the firms that had hired them for the summer. Following the conclusion of their summer internships, many of the interns were offered part-time positions with their respective firms as they completed their studies.

DETAILS, DETAILS

The following summary briefly describes what went into the planning and implementation of this program.

Planning and Program Management: Implementing a collaborative internship program requires a project manager to lead and manage the effort. Further, before undertaking such a program, the participants need to understand that such an effort requires a significant and sustained



“The in-office internship provided me with mentorship and support to advance my career as an environmental planner. I gained experience supporting a variety of planning tasks, including technical writing and report preparation of projects subject to CEQA and NEPA, technical analysis with CalEEMod, and stakeholder engagement.”

Mayra Garcia
(Master of Urban Planning Candidate, University of Southern California)



commitment of time and effort. Zachary Miller, a senior transportation planner with Ascent, stepped into this role and managed the overall internship program recruitment and charrette processes. Senior staff from each participating firm committed to help plan and implement the program. This effort required scheduling, coordinating, and participating in twice-a-month meetings; planning and implementing recruitment efforts; developing a detailed scope of work for the charrette; and coordinating and scheduling all training, guest speakers, and meetings and presentations.

Continued Collaboration: The planning and development of the program and its framework could not have been completed without the continued input, effort, and contributions of individuals from each of the five firms. Each firm was typically represented by two or three people at each of the internship program development meetings. The number of representatives proved to be sufficient for ensuring that all goals of the internship were expressed, considered, and agreed on, including hourly salaries.

The collaborating firms agreed that all expenses associated with the implementation of the charrette would be split equally. Some interns had to travel from other parts of the state to Sacramento. Regardless, the firms agreed to equally split travel, hotel, and per diem charges for all the interns.

Recruitment: The recruitment effort was initiated through the development and distribution of a flyer that described the intent, mission statement, and application process of the internship program. Carey Fernandes, Dudek’s NEPA/CEQA practice director, developed the flyer with input from the other firms. Before a flyer was distributed, however, schools were screened to ensure that they had a curriculum consistent with the focus of the internship program and to ensure that the enrollment demographics of each school’s relevant program reflected the intent of the program. To ensure that the selected schools fully understood the intent and mission of the program, the firms contacted career advisors or internship coordinators at each school. This step was critical to ensure the schools would actively push the program to its qualified students. We now know to start this process much earlier in the year. In the end, the flyer was distributed to nearly 40 colleges and universities throughout California, 65 applications were received, and more than 30 applicants were interviewed for the 10 positions. The five firms discussed the applicant pool to ensure a skill set and geographic fit between the interns and the participating firms.

Two-Week Charrette: Barbra Calantas, ESA’s biological resources director, possesses a certificate from the Cornell University Diversity and Inclusion Program. In preparation for the event, she applied her deep knowledge and understanding about the implementation of such programs and developed and conducted a training session for all the professionals who staffed the charrette. The training session was focused on working with BIPOC individuals, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Nearly every day of the charrette included “table talks,” presentations and discussions led by industry professionals from the firms, City of Sacramento



staff, and, in some cases, other industry professionals. Among the table talk topics were site planning, CEQA, transportation planning, public engagement, housing, and climate action planning. Individual topics were selected and scheduled based on the specific work and tasks being completed by the interns on that day so they could immediately apply their new-found knowledge to the task at hand.

During the charrette, Zachary Miller and Jonathon Teofilo from ESA were on-site and actively managed the daily activities to ensure their smooth operation, address any logistical issues, and document each day's activities. Matt Maddox from Rincon and Mark Teague from PlaceWorks were on-site for most of the charrette, offering continued guidance and support to the interns as they worked through complex planning and environmental issues. Two or more additional professionals from the participating firms staffed the charrette each day. To help the interns imagine themselves in the role of the professionals they worked with, BIPOC professionals from each firm staffed the charrette when possible.



THE UPSHOT

The inaugural charrette and internship program were a success. The students learned a tremendous amount, formed friendships, and developed an understanding of the planning and environmental field that may lead to their entry into the profession. All the interns expressed enthusiasm about the charrette and the experience working at the firms during exit interviews. It is our hope that their enthusiasm for the program will be shared with other students and that it will increase the number of BIPOC students who choose to enter our profession.

Although the charrette required tremendous commitment from professionals already facing a demanding workload, the program was so rewarding that we are all committed to bringing it back next year. One change we have decided to make is to expand our focus to include students in community colleges.

Moreover, we want the success of this program to inspire the creation of other, similar internship programs and partnerships not only in the planning and environmental field but in transportation, architecture, landscape architecture, civil engineering, and, frankly, all industries. Together, we hope to create the more diverse and more effective workforce we have talked about for years, one that resembles the communities in which we live and work.

For more information, contact gary.jakobs@ascentenvironmental.com or zachary.miller@ascentenvironmental.com.

